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Suspended redistribution: ‘green economy’ and water inequality in the Waterberg, South Africa

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In this article I show how ideas and practices of ‘green economy’ can reproduce and even naturalise inequality in water access for local users. Evidence to support my argument is drawn from the Waterberg region in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Following the demise of apartheid and the appeal of the green economy, the Waterberg has been ‘reinvented’ as a wildlife destination. Whereas game farms enjoy secure water supply, the rural poor relocated to the small town of Vaalwater suffer severe water shortages. The article questions the mainstream view according to which game farms have no relationship to the water problems in town. Rather, I suggest that by conceiving and managing water as a private commodity deriving from land ownership and largely unregulated by the state, green economy initiatives contribute both materially and discursively to hampering more equality in water redistribution.

Keywords: water; inequality; private game farms; South Africa; agrarian political economy

Introduction

The Waterberg Biosphere Reserve is a magical part of South Africa which is easily accessible from Africa’s industrial powerhouse, Gauteng. It is very old, and yet a very new place too. With its unique history of sparse human settlement, it has been perfectly placed to reinvent itself, following the dawn of democracy in South Africa, as a stunningly beautiful and highly significant conservation area.¹

These few opening lines of an attractive brochure aimed at guiding tourists through the meanders of the Waterberg plateau dirt roads perfectly sketches the contours of the myth on which the production of this area as a wildlife destination rests. Although it provides traces of human presence from thousands of years ago, it was only in the second half of the 19th century that a handful of white settlers

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occupied this part of Northern Transvaal (today Limpopo) permanently. According to the myth, this 'unique' population dynamic – partly explained by the difficult environmental conditions of the plateau, bounded by the Waterberg escarpment – contributed to the preservation of the place as an 'unspoilt wilderness' and adequately demonstrates why it was 'perfectly placed' to respond to the appeal of the 'green economy' mostly via private conservation activities, such as game farms and nature reserves.² The advertising board at the entrance of the local Spar invites visitors to 'Relax. You're in The Bush.' Surely, this is what Pretoria and Johannesburg residents, who stop in the small town of Vaalwater after a three-hour drive to buy the last supplies for a weekend getaway – but also international tourists who finally stretch their legs after having been picked up at OR Tambo International Airport – often do. In order to reach their destinations (be it a luxurious lodge or a self-catering cottage), they do not need to drive around the dusty and crowded streets of the local township of Leseding. By staring at the vast stretches of hilly bushveld landscape – always fenced – outside their car windows and making a couple of game sightings, their dream of being at one with nature is enacted.

Since the very purpose of this brochure and other popular publications, which have recently appeared on the Waterberg,³ is to forge and convey a simple story to tourists, they tend to overlook possible elements of tension, such as the fact that most of the game that can be admired in the region today was actually reintroduced over the past 30 years. Above all, the myth about the Waterberg being essentially a conservation area tends to disembed it from the agrarian political economy of the place as shaped by colonialism and apartheid. By putting conservation back into its agrarian context, we can see how it influences the redistribution of natural resources and determines who is winning and who is losing from these green development processes.

In this article I focus on water to show how specific ideas and practices of green economy can reproduce and even naturalise inequality in access for local users. Whereas on private nature reserves and game farms water *must* be abundant in order to guarantee that the demands of landowners, tourists and wildlife are satisfied, water provision in Vaalwater *can* be interrupted to the point where the minimum standards for basic water provision are not met. This situation is especially affecting the black and poor population of Leseding, where people are progressively relocating from private farms and the rural villages in the former Bantustan of Lebowa.

The article questions the mainstream view according to which game farms are saving water and do not have a relationship with the water problems experienced in town. Rather, I suggest that they do consume water and contribute both materially and discursively to hamper more equality in water redistribution. More specifically I identify three ways in which private nature conservation is actively reproducing water inequality in the Waterberg: by conceiving and managing water as a commodity deriving from land ownership; by being excepted from state regulation; and by excluding local black people (except as labour) from its project of social production of space.

The quotation opening this section argues for a compelling linkage between democracy, transformation ('reinvention') and nature conservation. From a water political economy perspective, however, the transformation taking place in the Waterberg appears to be fundamentally conservative, inasmuch as local power

relations remain unchallenged and private control over natural resources (especially land and water) is tightened. It is here that I see the main reason why water redistribution is currently failing in the plateau, as opposed to the lack of municipal capacity argument dominating the country's public discourse both at the national and local level.

The data presented in the article were collected during a one-year period of fieldwork in the Waterberg plateau, carried out between August 2013 and August 2014. I engaged with Vaalwater and Leseding residents and with owners and managers of private nature reserves and game farms through a combination of social research methods.

The rest of the article is structured in three major sections. First, I situate my contribution within the debates on the changing agrarian political economy of South Africa and the social consequences of private conservation initiatives. Second, I briefly sketch the history of the production of the Waterberg as a conservation site and point out some recent trends in this on-going process. Finally, I analyse water inequality in the Waterberg by considering the specific ways in which game farms and private nature reserves reproduce and naturalise it.

Situating water within agrarian political economy debates

The Waterberg falls within the borders of former *white* rural South Africa, where the land-water nexus is paramount. Being dependent upon access to land, the distribution of water resources is similarly deeply unequal and skewed along racial lines.⁴ For this reason it is crucial to situate our discussion on water access within a broader debate on the agrarian political economy of the place, revolving around issues of land, labour and livelihoods. In this way I also intend to problematise a tendency in South African public discourse towards establishing dualisms – in this context, farm vs town(ship) – by unravelling the historical and present-day relationships between people and spaces.⁵

One of the most important lines of enquiry to recently emerge in the field of critical agrarian studies refers to the new phenomenon of land and resource accumulation known as 'grabbing'.⁶ In the course of the years authors have moved beyond a focus on agriculture alone as the main driver of land grabs to conceptualise the notions of 'green grabbing' and 'water grabbing'.⁷ Green grabbing has been defined as a dynamic of accumulation (by powerful actors) and dispossession (of poor and marginalised communities) for declared environmental purposes. What is qualitatively new about this process is that it takes place in a context where environmental concerns have become mainstream – the very notion of green economy being a case in point – and nature is commodified to provide new avenues both for capital accumulation *and* to 'repair' environmental loss (in line with the notion of neoliberal conservation).⁸ Water grabbing, on the other hand, has been identified as an issue apart, to emphasise the fact that, without secure access to water, agricultural land has no value but also to point out that water itself can be the object of grabbing (especially in relation to hydropower and mining projects).⁹ Water is fluid in time and space, however, and this makes it more difficult to reallocate control over it as well as to evaluate the social consequences of the grabbing.

The scholarship on land and resource grabbing cautions us that, although these are to be interpreted as global phenomena related to the contemporary

phase of neoliberal capitalism, local contexts always matter in that it is they that will ultimately shape the specific forms in which the (re)appropriation takes place. Moreover, to fully grasp the sense of injustice that is conveyed by the expression 'grabbing', it is important to keep in mind the particular histories of dispossession that characterise a specific place. For this, we need to turn our attention to the agrarian question in post-apartheid South Africa.

Hitherto South African land reform has had meagre and even controversial results, with the deadline for redistributing 30% of the land postponed to 2025, thousands of restitution claims yet to be settled or recently reopened and almost 1.7 million people evicted from commercial farms between 1984 and 2004.¹⁰ Yet it is so full of symbolic meanings (such as restorative justice and national identity) that it cannot simply be put aside.¹¹ It is not all about land, however. The contemporary agrarian question has been rephrased to ask whether and how a comprehensive agrarian reform can contribute to solving the extreme poverty (both in rural areas and in slum settlements around cities) and growing inequality characterising the country.¹²

The conversion of commercial farms from traditional activities like crop and livestock production to wildlife production (eco-tourism, hunting, venison production, game breeding and trading) represents an important land-use change in the agrarian landscape that has prompted the emergence of a critical scholarship in recent years.¹³ Some authors do not hesitate to interpret farm conversion as a local manifestation of green grabbing on the basis of the transformation of wildlife into a commodity, whose value has been escalating, and of the fact that only the wealthy can afford to buy game and the large tracts of wilderness it needs.¹⁴ This new practice of land enclosure does indeed seem at odds with the purpose of justice embedded in the land reform and research has shown how nature conservation can actually work as a strong moral justification to keep both the government and claimants at bay, at the same time helping white farmers negotiate their new role in democratic South Africa.¹⁵ Other authors, however, have nuanced the discursive and material contours of the dispossession suffered by the people who live and work the land without owning it (ie farm workers and dwellers) following the conversion to game farming.¹⁶ Their particular histories of past displacement and mobility seem in fact to account for whether the conversion is perceived as yet another round of exclusion or as a decisive rupture.

The lives and experiences of the rural 'working poor' thus come to the fore when we put our analysis of the green economy into agrarian contexts.¹⁷ Existing research on private game farming has indeed focused on the social consequences that conversion entails for these subjects, especially their tenure and labour relations. Scholars have found that, contrary to mainstream views about the positive contribution of private conservation to poverty alleviation,¹⁸ game farms offer fewer job opportunities than traditional ones, the positions offered are usually low-skilled, and salaries are aligned to those employed in agriculture, which are the lowest.¹⁹ Moreover, the presence of fences and dangerous game affects people's mobility and their ability to keep livestock and access grazing. The loss of jobs coupled with increasingly difficult living conditions has caused many workers and dwellers to leave the farm voluntarily or forcibly, thus fulfilling the idea that wild nature must be emptied of human presence (or at least of some humans).²⁰ Displaced workers make for a new group of 'surplus people' with no

other choice than relocating to informal settlements or rural towns.²¹ It is at this juncture that a water perspective can provide new insight into the debates discussed above. Before addressing water issues in more depth, however, the next section provides an overview of the process of conversion that has been taking place in the Waterberg.

Producing nature in the Waterberg: from traditional to game farming

Similarly to the rest of South Africa the first private nature reserves were proclaimed by Waterberg landowners in the 1960s.²² However, conservation activities became common only in the 1980s, following the initiative of some wealthy white businessmen and farmers, usually self-proclaimed 'conservationists' who intended to bring the place back to its 'original wilderness'. As one of the landowners that I interviewed put it, she started the reserve to rescue a land 'destroyed' by overgrazing and to bring the bush back to its 'natural' status.²³ At that time the landscape consisted mainly of livestock and crop private farmland. Cattle farming was the most widespread land use because of the dry climate and a soil poor in nutrients, alternating rocks and sand. Yet, where irrigation was possible, that is, along the Mokolo River, sandy soils favoured the development of tobacco farming, making Vaalwater one of the major tobacco growing areas of the country to date.

Within a context of deregulation of agriculture – that is, the removal of marketing boards and other state subsidies, which started in the mid-1970s and accelerated after 1994²⁴ – and following the institution of private ownership of game (via the Game Theft Act, 1991), the conversion of traditional farmland into private nature reserves and game farms started to make economic sense.²⁵ Only a few landowners were able to fund the conversion, however. The development of Welgevonden Game Reserve, for instance, albeit initiated in 1987 by the farm owner, Pienkes Du Plessis, was soon taken over by Rand Merchant Bank. Most of the time it was wealthy individuals from other parts of the country, or even from abroad, who bought the land from local farmers in financial difficulties and then invested their own capital to incorporate more land from adjoining farms, bring down cattle fences and other farming infrastructure, introduce game – long disappeared thanks to hunting for trade in the Transvaal of the 19th century and agriculture thereafter – and to build suitable fences.

Although some of the new owners employed their game-stocked properties as family hunting farms, a preservationist approach seemed to build momentum in the 1980s. This was largely promoted by the figure of Clive Walker, game ranger, artist and founder of the Endangered Wildlife Foundation, who moved to the plateau around that time. In 1981 Walker found in the businessman Dale Parker an investor for the purchase of a farm, which was later developed into the 36,000 ha private nature reserve Lapalala Wilderness. Similarly Walker was able to reach other 'like-minded' people with the means to buy land adjoining Lapalala. Then, in 1990, he prompted the foundation of the Waterberg Nature Conservancy, whose first members were Lapalala and the two neighbouring game farms Kwalata Wilderness and Touchstone Game Ranch. The original scope of the Conservancy was to take all the fences down and transform the Waterberg into an extensive wilderness, with no human use allowed. This triggered opposition

from the farming community and the establishment of a frontline between farmers (mostly Afrikaners) and conservationists (mostly English-speaking) which, to a large extent, continues to date. Conservationists won an important battle at the time, as Lapalala disputed and eventually halted the construction of a government dam on its land – a so-called ‘election dam’, meant to secure farmers’ votes – to protect the ‘pristine’ Lephhalala River system.²⁶

Notwithstanding the Conservancy’s original purposes, more fences have actually gone up in the course of the years and conservation in the plateau is now largely managed according to commercial principles. Under the ownership of Duncan Parker (son of Dale), even Lapalala has started a partnership with businessmen Gianni Ravazzotti and Peter Anderson; the three of them have developed a ‘bold’ plan to assure more funding for the reserve activities.²⁷ The plan includes the following: expanding the already existing special species breeding project; enhancing tourism; and offering to individuals and companies the opportunity to invest in the reserve and become ‘custodians’ of the land.

Local authorities are supportive of this shift in the modes of production from traditional agriculture to green activities and intend to sustain it by developing a ‘Waterberg brand’ that would make the place distinctive and competitive on the global tourism market.²⁸ The proclamation of the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2001 also contributed to increasing the international visibility of the Waterberg, although some locals remain sceptical of the work done on the ground by the NGO administering it.²⁹

To protect nature while at the same time making a profit out of it has meant focusing on those conservation activities that can guarantee the highest returns to landowners. In a relatively small area such as the plateau, with a billboard advertising a game lodge at every turn of the (dirt) road, this implies catering for the needs of upper market eco-tourists and overseas hunters, who are willing to spend up to around ZAR5000 per day – or even ZAR10,000 in the most exclusive of lodges.³⁰

Besides eco-tourism and trophy hunting, a sub-sector, which has gained prominence in the past 10 years, is that of game breeding. Snijders has documented the ‘escalation of commodity value’ of wildlife, whose turnover increased from ZAR9 million in 1991 to ZAR303 million in 2010.³¹ More recently the Deputy President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, who owns a game farm in the district, hit the headlines for bidding ZAR19.5 million for a buffalo cow.³² Although some insiders do not hesitate to qualify it as a market bubble, ready to burst at any time, investors keep trading in live game (especially rare and exotic species), attracted by a return of 300% or even 400%.³³ Small ranchers, who start afresh in the wildlife industry, keep the demand for common game high (sometimes supplied by livestock farmers diversifying their activities), whereas big players provide the individual or corporate capital necessary to specialise in genetics and to produce game of higher value. Apart from meat production, which is partly for export, the end-uses of game are mainly local: wildlife is sold to other farms for trophy and recreational hunting, safaris and further breeding. On the Waterberg plateau the two reserves which have made breeding their core business and are now in a position to organise their own auctions are Keta Private Game Reserve and Shambala Game Reserve, both owned by white South African millionaires.³⁴ Keta alone made a profit of

ZAR26 million at its last auction in May 2014.³⁵ Not only have game auctions surpassed cattle ones in frequency and sale volume, but they have also become an important social event for Waterberg landowners. One can immediately recognise an auction day by the unusually high number of cars – plus a few helicopters – parked on the side of the tar road. In principle, all local families can afford the opportunity to admire fancy animals, such as black impalas and golden gnus – kept in pens though, not roaming ‘freely’ in the bush; nevertheless, apart from black workers, white and khaki dominate the landscape.

Another trend, which has (re)emerged in the past 10 years, is the increase in the number of reserves and farms for the private use of landowners, sometimes in the form of wildlife estates. Here, the commodification of wilderness occurs through the valuation of converted land, which creates new investment opportunities for the well-to-do. There may be situations where a landowner rents out a small cottage to weekend tourists or starts a breeding project, but only to make an extra income, since he or she does not need to make a living out of the land. In the Waterberg, those who own a game farm or a portion of a wildlife estate for the purpose of spending weekends, enjoying an early retirement or even starting a family in close contact with ‘nature’ constitute a diversified group.³⁶ Generally speaking, however, they tend to be white and use English as a medium of communication. The closeness (in terms of South African distances) of the plateau to Johannesburg international airport has turned the place into a haven for foreigners eager to buy their own ‘piece of paradise’ and prompted by a favourable exchange rate. The majority of foreign landowners come from Europe, but some travel from as far as the USA to spend a week or two every year in their bush home. Besides practical considerations, such as its being close to Gauteng, malaria-free and much cheaper than the Cape, what makes the plateau attractive to potential overseas buyers is that it matches quite well their ideas of wild Africa as an ‘empty’ land. This is not to say that there are no people living in the area, of course, but as long as white people stay on their secluded farms and black people are gathered in one *location* – instead of being scattered all over the place – the illusion is preserved. Moreover, this contributes to the perception of a safe countryside compared with other parts of South Africa.³⁷

A useful indicator of the upsurge in the demand for game farms as private residential land is the composition of the Waterberg Nature Conservancy membership. The number of Conservancy members who own land for private use only doubled between 2002 and 2010, amounting to 16, or 40% of the total.³⁸ This change is reflected in the Conservancy activities – often described by non-members as an ‘exclusive, wealthy, English-speaking club’³⁹ – now revolving around a general meeting held once every two months where, in addition to housekeeping matters, a guest speaker gives a talk on something broadly related to environmental conservation.

Eventually the uplift of the local community (read blacks) has made it on to the agenda of the Conservancy and of other green economy businesses in the Waterberg. Besides the usual rhetoric of helping the poor by creating new jobs – particularly questionable in the case of game breeding and residential developments – this has implied the establishment of a few charities.⁴⁰ It is not to deny the good done by such initiatives to note that, by giving back just a little to the community, without putting its ‘poverty and disease’ in relation to the history

and political economy of the place,⁴¹ the unequal distribution of resources in the area never comes into question and ends up being reinforced.⁴² Access to water offers a clear example of this.

Following water through farms and town

During the colonial and apartheid times the Waterberg's landscape was actively produced to accommodate the needs of a small class of white commercial farmers. Its water resources (both surface and underground) were therefore appropriated by landowners, who used them according to the following hierarchy: their produce, their own reproduction, and that of their workers. The small town of Vaalwater was founded at the beginning of the 20th century as a service point for the local farming community. Following the 1931 Transvaal Townships and Town-planning Ordinance, based on the principle of racial segregation, urban planning provided for water being supplied from the nearby Mokolo River, as long as this would not undermine the irrigation rights of riparian farms.⁴³

Plans for the establishment of a township for 'non-Europeans' were discussed in 1948, but nothing was implemented; since Vaalwater was located in the midst of European farmers, the landscape was to be cleared of black presence too. In 1965 the town was declared a 'whites-only' area on the basis of the Group Areas Act, 1950 and black residents were displaced to the Bantustan of Lebowa.⁴⁴ It was only in 1996 that the newly elected African National Congress (ANC) government authorised the foundation of the township of Leseding, by providing the first RDP (state-subsidised) houses. Some blacks relocated there from white farms because they were tired of living on someone else's land, prone to their *baas's* (master) abuses, whereas for those living in the rural villages of Lebowa the township offered more opportunities in terms of jobs and services (such as schools, shops and the clinic). However, many did not choose to live in Leseding, they simply did not have any alternative. Feeling threatened by the perspective of an imminent land reform, some white farmers loaded their trucks with their workers' families and moved them to the township. Other black families living on white land were evicted when the elderly – the only ones who were still working the land – could not work anymore or when the property was sold and converted into a game farm.

As those Leseding residents who were children in the mid-1990s started to have their own families, and foreign migrants (from Zimbabwe and Mozambique), who became instrumental in the economy of the region as a pool of cheap labour on crop and cattle farms, started to arrive, the demand for water services in town increasingly exceeded the supply, to the point that today residents suffer from severe water shortages.⁴⁵ Table 1 provides a description of water access in the Waterberg, by considering how many hours per day water is actually running through taps and how many litres of water per day a person is able to consume for domestic uses. The data show how water access is highly unequal and ultimately dependent upon settlement patterns, namely whether one resides in the former white suburbs, in the township, or on a private game farm.

Two issues in relation to the data need to be clarified. First, the striking difference in water access between suburbs and township (both served by Modimolle Local Municipality (MLM)⁴⁶) is explained by better water infrastructure in the suburbs coupled with many of their residents having the means to drill

Table 1. Access to water in the Waterberg.

Typology of settlement	Water availability (hrs/d)	Water consumption (l/c/d)
Vaalwater suburbs	9	195
Leseding Ext #1	2	26
Leseding Ext #2	2	46
Leseding Ext #3	3	32
Leseding Ext #4	4	26
Leseding Ext #5	4	27
Leseding Ext #6	3	22
Game farms/private nature reserves	24	606

Source: data from structured and semi-structured interviews with 90 residents.

a borehole in their yard or buy a 15,000-litre water tank. Second, the even more striking difference between town and game farms is explained in part by the fact that trying to focus only on the domestic uses of water on farms, for the purpose of comparing them with those in town, turns out to be an almost impossible task, because water consumption on the former is rarely metered and the same source is normally used for several activities at the same time. Moreover, water infrastructure serving the needs of owners, managers and tourists can be very different from that supplying farm workers.

If coping with water shortages in town may ultimately be seen as a matter of individual capacity of storing water for personal consumption, then in Leseding residents can rarely afford the luxury of a water tank and have to rely on more mundane containers, hence the far inferior amounts of water they are able to consume. The dependence on containers is already evident in Extension 1 and 2, where RDP houses are provided with in-house and yard taps, respectively and residents have to be ready to collect water whenever it comes, but it becomes all the more urgent in the other four extensions of the township, which are provided only with communal taps. Here, access to water actually means waking up at 4 am or 5 am to start queuing at the tap, hoping that water will last until your turn comes.

The mainstream narrative among those who do not live in town and do have secure water access maintains that such problems are the direct result of the municipality's lack of capacity coupled with continuous influxes of illegals 'who were never meant to be there'.⁴⁷ However, my argument is that a major redistribution of people – mainly black farm workers becoming superfluous to the economic needs of white farming *and* inimical to the whites' politics of place based on nature conservation – has not been followed by an adequate redistribution of resources that would satisfy basic human needs, such as safe and continuous water access. The sense of injustice conveyed by this – and seen in the light of the history of dispossession of the place – is clearly not shared by everyone. In the imagination of white landowners the fences demarcating their private property act as a border separating the world of the farm from that of town. Anything happening outside a private fence automatically becomes the municipality's responsibility. No relationships are drawn between worlds so far apart, except an emotional response (translating into charity initiatives) to the stark contrast between abundance and deprivation characterising the place. Instead, I contend that such relationships between people and space exist and it is important to trace them, hence to follow water through farms and town.

From the perspective of the local municipality, water supply in Vaalwater cannot be increased for two main reasons. First, water sources are to be found on private land and landowners – especially irrigation farmers – fight hard to keep control over their ‘existing lawful uses’.⁴⁸ For instance, although there are landowners whose water allocation exceeds their current needs, and who are keen on making a profit by renting their boreholes to the municipality, they may face opposition from other farmers, who think their own activities will be put at risk.⁴⁹ Second, a large part of the water resources of the plateau, collected in the Mokolo Dam (about 60 km to the north of Vaalwater), have been earmarked for other national ‘strategic’ uses. In fact, this dam is intended to supply water to the new Eskom Medupi Power Station, a massive coal plant near the town of Lephalale, which is expected to solve the country’s energy crisis.⁵⁰

Up to now private nature conservation has tended to remain in the background of the South African water debate. I think it is time to bring this important land-use change and its relationship to water resource to the fore. I will start by looking at three specific ways in which game farms actively reproduce water inequality in the Waterberg both materially and discursively.

First, in the National Water Act, 1998 (NWA) – the cornerstone of the post-apartheid water legislative framework – water is declared ‘a natural resource that belongs to all people’ under public trusteeship and the notion of water *rights* is replaced with that of water *uses*, which need to be regulated by the state via registration and licensing.⁵¹ However, game farmers – similarly to traditional farmers – do not conceive water as a public or common good, which can be redistributed to accommodate the needs of all, but rather as a private one that they rightfully appropriated when purchasing the land. The fact that they do not receive a service from the municipality, but have to provide water for themselves, by pumping it out of a river or a borehole, reinforces their perception of private ownership over this natural resource. Since water is ‘theirs’, game farmers also feel that they can legitimately do anything they want with it. For instance, they can prevent any extraction from 88 km of river shoreline for conservation purposes, such as in the case of Lapalala Wilderness. Most of the time, however, they do extract water and, especially when offering eco-tourism services, this goes well beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. A ‘wild’ experience in the bush in fact seems inconceivable without running taps, toilets connected to a sewage system (mostly a septic tank) and amenities such as swimming pools, Jacuzzis and private dams.

Second, given the Department of Water and Sanitation’s (DWS) narrow focus on irrigation,⁵² private conservation activities have not been targeted for the purpose of regulating water uses and redressing past inequalities in water allocation. As a result, game farms and private nature reserves know very little about Water Use Licensing, Registration and Revenue Collection (WARMS) and usually do not register their water use, apply for a licence or pay water fees. Two narratives are employed by game farmers to justify their exemption.

On the one side, game farmers claim to use little water – that is, in comparison to irrigation farmers. However, most of them do not monitor their water consumption and therefore cannot support their claims with actual figures. They do not see the point of installing a water meter, since they have water in abundance and do not need to pay for what they consume. In my research I

tried together with game farm owners and managers to calculate – usually on the basis of educated guesses – what their average daily water consumption was. The extreme results are quite interesting: a small (3000 ha) farm with three permanent residents (two owners and one staff member) and the capacity to accommodate up to 12 guests (generally over weekends) would consume around 1000 l/d, whereas a big (34,000 ha) reserve with 350 permanent residents on average (guests and staff) would consume around 275,000 l/d.⁵³ A number of factors contribute to explain this difference, namely: farm size; the number of permanent residents; the game species present (and whether the farmer waters them during the dry winter months); and the types of activity conducted (whether the farmer grows lucerne to feed the game, irrigates lawns, offers tourists horse riding safaris or even the possibility of playing golf). The point here is that water does turn out to be a strategic resource for game farms, too. Indeed, checking the availability of water sources before the purchase of a property is as important as checking for possible land claims. Nonetheless, there is a serious lack of data about the quantities of water actually consumed. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear definition of ‘small volumes’ – the threshold for registration and licensing, according to DWS – the initiative to approach the Department is left to the discretion of individual landowners, who usually do not want any government interference in their activities for fear of losing what they perceive as ‘their’ water and ending up paying more taxes.

On the other side, game farmers maintain that – again, since they do not irrigate – they employ water only for *domestic* purposes and therefore fall within the category of Schedule 1 water uses, that is, permissible uses according to the NWA. Nevertheless, the Act reads ‘A person may, subject to this Act take water for reasonable domestic use in that person’s household, directly from any water resource to which that person has lawful access’,⁵⁴ whereas on game farms water often becomes an essential component of a commercial service (think of eco-tourism or game trading) and therefore in need of authorisation.

Finally, not only does the conversion to game farming *de facto* reproduce a system whereby land ownership (instead of citizenship) discriminates between those who can access water and those who cannot, but it is also and deliberately naturalising the inequality ensuing from it. For instance, game farmers tend to oppose the physical redistribution of water on the basis of a natural limit, namely the hydrogeology of the Waterberg. Since aquifers are scattered unevenly across the plateau, they argue, it is only *natural* that some properties have a reliable water supply, while others do not. To transfer water from secluded farms into town would be practically and economically unfeasible and, above all, it would represent a blatant attack on private property rights.⁵⁵ In addition, foreign landowners seem to understand inequality as a *natural* feature of the South African landscape, so that the fact that (black) people in town have to queue at a tap at dawn in order to fill a bucket, whereas (white) people on a farm can enjoy water in abundance is simply perceived as ‘the way things are’.⁵⁶ What is deeply problematic about these perspectives is not only their total lack of empathy for the living conditions of the majority of the local population of the Waterberg, but in particular their unravelling of a project of social production of space, whereby the place is valued and marketed as an unspoilt wilderness, whereas the presence of a growing mass of working poor and

destitute people dependent upon social grants is perceived as highly *unnatural* and their water needs are disputed.

Conclusion

In this article I have questioned the mainstream view according to which game farms are saving water resources in the Waterberg (as opposed to irrigated crop farms) and have no relationship to the water problems in Vaalwater (caused by municipal inefficiency), while showing how green economy initiatives contribute to the reproduction and legitimization of inequality in access to water for local users. Indeed, some of those rural poor who suffer water shortages in the township of Leseding come from farms that were at some point converted into 'wilderness'. By moving – or being moved – into town, people have lost access to a secure, albeit limited, water supply. The point here is not whether municipal officials can deliver the limited resources at their disposal more efficiently. This is rather being used as a pretext to shift attention away from what is really at stake, namely how the citizenship rights of the rural poor and their role in the rural space are shaped by the process of conversion into private nature conservation. I have argued that nature conservation in the Waterberg is fundamentally built on the conservation of unequal power relations and this is the main reason why the redistribution of resources (land and water) is failing.

When framing the debate on water redistribution in terms of unequal power relations and social production of space – determining who is included and who is excluded from a place and its resources – it becomes clear that we also need to take the national level into account. The water question in the post-apartheid order has become fundamentally political and goes well beyond 'fixing' service delivery in small and under-resourced municipalities. It is the government and its national department, as custodians of the country's water resources, which have the legal and political means to produce change so that water access stops being a means to perpetuate discrimination among South African citizens. This calls for new research on both the politics of water redistribution and on the government's perception of what constitutes a just and equal society in contemporary South Africa.

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Notes

1. Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, *The Waterberg Meander*, 5.
2. According to UNEP's definition, a green economy is deemed to enhance economic growth while reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. UNEP, *Towards a Green Economy*, 16.
3. Hunter, *Pioneers of the Waterberg*; Taylor et al., *The Waterberg*; and Walker and Bothma, *The Soul of the Waterberg*.
4. See Cullis and van Koppen, *Applying the Gini Coefficient*; and Woodhouse, "Reforming Land and Water Rights."
5. A clear example of dualism is the 'two economies' rhetoric. For a political economy critique, see "Transcending Two Economies", the special issue of *Africanus* edited by Bond; and Marais, *South Africa*, 193–198.
6. Fairbairn et al., "Introduction."
7. Fairhead et al., "Green Grabbing"; and Mehta et al., "Introduction."
8. Büscher, "Letters of Gold"; and Fairhead et al., "Green Grabbing," 238.
9. Mehta et al., "Introduction."
10. O'Laughlin et al., "Introduction," 8; and Wegerif et al., *Still Searching for Security*, 41.
11. Du Toit, "Real Acts, Imagined Landscapes."
12. O'Laughlin et al., "Introduction," 4.
13. Brooks et al., "Creating a Commodified Wilderness"; and Snijders, "Wild Property." See also Spierenburg and Brooks, "Private Game Farming."
14. Snijders, "Wild Property."
15. Brandt and Spierenburg, "Game Fences in the Karoo."
16. Spierenburg and Brooks, "Private Game Farming."
17. Hall et al., "Farm Workers and Farm Dwellers," 53.
18. Langholz and Kerley, *Combining Conservation and Development*.
19. Snijders, "Wild Property"; and Spierenburg and Brooks, "Private Game Farming."
20. The conversion to game farming is only one of the many complex reasons explaining farm evictions during the post-apartheid era. Hall et al. interpret these in relation to overlapping and conflicting 'trajectories of change', namely agriculture restructuring and securing tenure for farm workers and dwellers. Hall et al., "Farm Workers and Farm Dwellers."
21. Li, "To Make Live"; and Spierenburg and Brooks, "Private Game Farming."
22. Snijders, "Wild Property," 506.
23. Personal communication, private nature reserve owner, June 28, 2014.
24. Vink and van Rooyen, *The Economic Performance*, 4.
25. Snijders, "Wild Property." The wildlife industry tends to make a distinction between conservation activities with no commercial purposes (nature reserves) and commercial activities based on the protection, but at the same time 'sustainable' use, of natural resources, such as eco-tourism, hunting and game breeding (game farms). However, this distinction is now blurring and in this article I employ the terms interchangeably.
26. Personal communication, local resident, May 9, 2014.
27. <http://lapalala.com/the-new-development/>, accessed March 4, 2015. Gianni Ravazzotti is the founder of Italtiles and was ranked among Africa's 40 Richest by *Forbes* in 2011. Peter Anderson is CEO of Anderson Wildlife Properties.
28. Waterberg District Municipality, <http://www.waterberg.gov.za/docs/LED%20Brand.pdf>, accessed March 2, 2015.
29. Personal communication, game farm manager, May 14, 2014.
30. At the time of writing, ZAR100 = US\$8.5.
31. Snijders, "Wild Property," 512–513.
32. *Farmer's Weekly*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.farmersweekly.co.za/article.aspx?id=22178&h=Talking-bull-with-Cyril-Ramaphosa>.
33. Personal communication, game farm manager, June 11, 2014.
34. These are Terry McLintock, founder of Canon South Africa, and the insurance magnate Douw Steyn, respectively.
35. Personal communication, game farm manager, June 11, 2014.
36. On the website of Jembisa, now in the eco-tourism business, one can read that it all started with 'a family who wanted to provide their children with an African "barefoot in the bush" childhood'. See <http://www.jembisa.com/bushhome/the-bush-home/a-family-story.html>, accessed March 3, 2015.
37. See Steinberg, *Midlands*.
38. In 2010 the Conservancy had 40 members in total, whereas in 2014 it had 70. Untitled draft document personally received from the Biosphere.
39. Personal communication, game farm owner, April 22, 2014.
40. A case in point is the Waterberg Welfare Society, established in 2000 by two local residents with the support of the Wilson Foundation, the charitable organisation of the American interior designer of luxury hotels, Trisha Wilson. In an interview Wilson commented: '22 years ago, I was awarded the Palace of

the Lost City project in South Africa's Sun City. That began my love affair with Africa [...] I ended up building a home in the Welgevonden game reserve. I became a member of the community, although I only visited there five weeks each year. You can't live in those communities and know those beautiful people and not get involved in fighting the poverty and disease.' *Interior Design*, June 18, 2013, <http://www.interiordesign.net/articles/detail/34576-10-qs-with-trisha-wilson/>.

41. Ibid.
42. See Ramutsindela et al., *Sponsoring Nature*.
43. National Archives of South Africa, TRB 2/1/651 124/0/65.
44. Black town residents were moved to the village of Steilloop, whereas farm workers were allowed to live on white farms and a few in a hostel in Vaalwater. National Archives of South Africa, HKN 1/1/19 HN9/15/3, TRB 217 4/0/65; and Rogerson and Letsoalo, "Resettlement and Under-development," 182.
45. According to the Census 2011, Vaalwater 'town' had a population of 3964 people and Leseding of 12,499. However, in 2012, the Vaalwater clinic registered a total population of 28,385 people. At the time of my research, water services were sourced from eight boreholes, which were bought or rented by the municipality along the years, with a total yield of 1.2 mega-litres per day.
46. MLM is both water service authority and service provider in Vaalwater. Although Modimolle town is 60 km distant to the south, Vaalwater was included in the municipality's borders following the new municipal demarcation process in 2000.
47. Personal communication, game farm owner, December 10, 2013.
48. These can be seen as the water equivalent of the constitutional property clause. However, following the phases of registration, validation, and verification, such uses are supposed to be granted (or denied) a water licence. Republic of South Africa, *National Water Act*, Chapter 1, Section 32.
49. Furthermore, the municipality finds it difficult to afford the price asked by farmers.
50. See Bond, "Theory and Practice."
51. Republic of South Africa, *National Water Act*.
52. Understandable in light of the fact that irrigation uses 60% of national water resources. DWA, *National Water Resource Strategy*, 9.
53. In this second case the reserve manager pointed out that they were very 'water conscious' and metered their water consumption. Also, they were registered with DWS, but did not pay water fees. Personal communication, game farm manager, November 5, 2013.
54. Republic of South Africa, *National Water Act*, Schedule 1.
55. One may note that infrastructure development faces hardly any limits on private reserves. Anyway, the point here is not to suggest that water needs to be physically redistributed but to show how the very idea of redistribution (of water and consequently land) is opposed. Personal communication, WNC general meeting, July 3, 2014.
56. Ibid.

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